

CONCLUSION

Racist Ideology: the end of history?

This is a story of a period between two World Wars – an interim in which Insanity cut loose, Liberty took a nose dive and Humanity was kicked around somewhat.

Charles Chaplin, *The Great Dictator*

Histories of mining towns frequently have class struggle over wages and conditions at their centre. In that sense, this history is no different. However, an important part of understanding the dynamics of class struggle is to explore the role of racist ideology within it. As demonstrated in Chapter One, the study of Australian racism has been a blinkered pursuit where racism is more commonly depicted as part of a competitive struggle *within* classes, rather than as a ruling class tool used by them in the rivalry *between* classes.¹ The racist hiring practices of many employers, the elite connections of RSL race rioters, the sympathetic responses of some trade unionists to their migrant counterparts – all these aspects of Australian race relations have been written out of virtually all historical accounts. The question of why employers might outspokenly support the White Australia policy while, at the same time, search for cheap, southern European labour to hire has similarly received little attention. These omissions mean that the historiography regarding Australian racism contains a large measure of ideological determinism. By this, I mean that there has been broad acceptance of the notion that racist responses from local workers towards migrant ‘competitors’ were an almost inevitable, even rational, feature of employment competition under capitalism.

¹ For example, Murray’s article about the racist implications of the Kalgoorlie woodline strikes was subtitled ‘a study of conflict *within* the working class’. J. Murray, ‘The Kalgoorlie Woodline Strikes 1919-1920: A Study of Conflict Within the Working Class’, *Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 5, 1982.

To overcome the limitations of this approach, this study has indicated how racism and class struggle are intertwined. It has demonstrated that mine employers had a material interest in promoting racial division among mine workers. A window into the way in which the White Australia policy was maintained has been created through an examination of the experiences of southern European migrant workers who came to Australia after World War One. While never ignoring the extent of working class involvement in racist agitation against these ‘strangers in a strange land’, the contributions and motivations of employers, politicians, conservative newspaper editors and other establishment representatives have been highlighted. The case study chapters have shown that employers in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill were not benign influences in local race debates. On the one hand, they held out British employment preference as an industrial ‘carrot’ which they hoped would distract local workers from the real source of their employment woes. On the other hand, they openly hired migrant workers on the basis that dirty, low-skilled, poorly-paid labouring jobs around the mines were particularly appropriate for southern Europeans. In this way, employers attempted to isolate southern Europeans from unionised Britisher workers, thereby limiting opportunities for the kind of fraternisation that might lead to united struggles for improved wages and conditions. In the eyes of the employers, this was the ‘stick’ – as long as Britisher workers saw their migrant counterparts as ‘scabs’, ‘slingbackers’ and ‘rate-busters’, the potential for strong unionism might be constrained.

Employer activism around racism is only one half of the required revision. The historiography of racism in Australia must acknowledge the significance of labour movement struggles that, in whatever shape or form, challenged the notion that migrant workers, and not local employers, were the main source of industrial problems. Despite the overwhelming onslaught of racist messages delivered through legislation, newspaper editorials, employer hiring practices and through countless other means, considerable resistance to racial division came from within the labour movement, challenging such management strategies. While workers hurling jam-tin bombs at fleeing migrant families might make good historical ‘copy’ and does not challenge the dominant explanations of racism in the historiography, such incidents must be seen as only part of a fully contextualised explanation of events. An Australian woman minding the

possessions of her migrant friend might not make for such a sensational story, but it is as much a part of local race relations as more public examples of racist invective and violence.

While instances of racist workers ‘declaiming’ against migrant workers were common, both case studies employed in this thesis show that unionised workers were not unanimous supporters of racist exclusion. Even amidst a bitter campaign for migrant exclusion, Broken Hill miners heard and responded positively to the internationalist arguments made by some of the left-wing leaders of their union. That Gully’s campaign was marginalised, although he was suggesting the very same exclusionary initiatives that are commonly alleged to be part and parcel of working class politics, shows that the majority of labour movement members considered the implications of his arguments and judged them unacceptable. Although the radicalism of the Broken Hill miners faded during the 1920s, official adherence to principled positions regarding union solidarity and internationalism were not easily erased. Even with the arguments of race rioters all around them, a significant number of Kalgoorlie workers appeared to explicitly distance themselves from the racist tide. Goldfields miners witnessed the terrible logic of racial antipathy at first hand. Shortly afterwards, they recognised the need for racial unity in campaigns against the mining employers, increasing their industrial strength as a result.

More than twenty years ago, Burgmann encouraged historians to look away from those falsely conscious workers who did look for racist solutions to their industrial problems. She urged further examination of ruling class interest in racial division in order to understand its ideological ramifications within the working class. Taking up that challenge, this study examined the role of the RSL in local race debates. During the war, a significant number of organised, militarised, ideologically-primed men from the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) demonstrated a keen willingness to patronise, harass and physically intimidate groups of people who did not fit their White Australian ideals. Back on home soil, the reputation of some ex-soldiers for direct action against that which displeased their collective sensibilities, inspired a sense of nervousness among local upholders of law and order. In this atmosphere, the RSL leadership deliberately galvanised a small but important group of returned soldiers for further service to the

nation. Part of their role was to propagandise about a range of conservative policies, including that of White Australia. The elite-dominated leadership of the RSL made public promises to protect the interests of returned soldiers, while privately working to ensure that RSL members were of the respectful, law-abiding and patriotic type. The RSL leadership used the ideology behind the White Australia policy in the way that it had always been used – as a piece of legislation that purported to defend working class wages and conditions while fundamentally seeking collaboration between white workers and their white employers. In this way, it could mask a concomitant hostility towards militant trade unionism behind calls for immigration restriction in the ‘interests’ of local workers.

By looking at racism as part of a more general class struggle, this study has garnered evidence that calls into question the three strands of explanation that feature prominently in the literature on Australian racism – firstly, the notion that it is the proximity of workers from different, non-British countries that engenders racial discord; secondly, the commonsensical view that workers have an economic interest in immigration restriction because of a ‘natural’ fear of cheap labour and increased competition for jobs; and thirdly, the view that racism towards migrants had a distinctly working class character that employers had no reason to encourage.

Competition for jobs?

Both case studies suggest that unionised workers were less, not more, likely to promote racist responses to migrant labour. Furthermore, union organisation provided a powerful means by which local workers could offer support to their migrant counterparts, as part of a collective effort. Despite a heightened atmosphere of racism and violence, Kalgoorlie workers used their union to oppose race rioting, to prevent further outbreaks and to offer practical support to the victims. In Broken Hill, it was the labour movement that debated the ramifications of a migrant presence on the mines. While a significant minority of workers were attracted by Richard Gully’s simplistic ‘remedy’ for unemployment – ‘tramp’ the migrants and regain jobs – the majority of the labour movement decisively rejected Gully’s overtures and, in so doing, sealed his political

defeat. No other group in Broken Hill had ‘the will or the way’ to promote anti-racist politics in such a decisive manner. The fact that significant debate around the question of migrant workers on the mines can be discerned in both towns is in itself an indication that the labour movement did not have a universally racist attitude towards southern European workers. Rather, its members were influenced by an enormous range of groups – from the RSL to the IWW – and, in these case studies at least, were won more by the argument that racial division was against their industrial best interests.

The labour movement responded to the arrival of non-Britisher workers in a variety of ways. Often members were motivated, not so much by racism, but by opposition to all attempts by employers to expand the pool of available workers in order to cheapen wage rates. While it is pointless to deny that labour movement opposition to employer initiatives aimed at ‘flooding’ the labour market frequently had a racist edge to it, it is also important to recognise union attitudes towards Britisher newcomers. Jack Coleman registered his disdain for the unemployed farmers who came to Kalgoorlie in search of work, an opposition based on anti-union attitudes among many of these workers that employers found attractive. In addition, farm life was not as debilitating as mine work and ‘farmers’ sons’, as he called them, were often seen as strapping, young and healthy men who would get preference from the employers over seasoned mine workers with ‘dusted’ lungs.² It was the same in Broken Hill. Southern European workers who had lived locally for a long time and proven their union loyalty were not a problem for Secretary of the AMA, W. D. Barnett. Of more concern were British workers who were recent arrivals and viewed as part of an employer strategy to increase employment competition.³

The preponderant involvement of young, unemployed men in racist campaigns is also worthy of comment. In the Kalgoorlie race riots, the arrest records and subsequent commentaries suggest that young and itinerant workers were overly represented in the mobs that ransacked homes and businesses. As the evidence cited in Chapter Five

² Interview with *Jack Coleman*, conducted by Stuart Reid on 19 September 1988, Battye Library ref. no. OH2062.

³ *Report of the Royal Commission on Mining Industry at Broken Hill* [hereafter *Royal Commission on Mining Industry*], presented to NSW Legislative Assembly, Sydney, 1914, p. 428.

attests, the majority of those arrested in the aftermath of the rioting were less than thirty years of age.⁴ While this fact ought not to mask the covert involvement of other social groups, it does suggest that racist invective struck a particular chord with local youths. Similarly, in Broken Hill, Gully's meetings were attended by groups of rowdy, young, often unemployed, men who, according to the *Barrier Daily Truth*, sat up the front cheering Gully and intimidating opposition speakers.⁵ In both cases, organised workers opposed racist agitation through their union. While often possessing the hegemonic racism of the times in their heads, unionists in both Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill had an industrial history that provided certain object lessons. In Kalgoorlie in 1919, AWU miners were forced to realise, however dimly, that Britisher returned soldiers were the enemies of trade unionism, while migrant workers offered solid industrial support against the employer. Similarly, in 1934, the horrific consequences of the race rioting for migrant families brought home to many miners the logic of racist politics. In Broken Hill, several speakers during the Gully campaign made reference to the fact that many southern European unionists had stood on the picket line during the 1892 strike, while Australian workers had scabbed.⁶

These object lessons were not available to young men who were yet to build a work, and trade union, history. Far from being unionism that inculcated racism in workers' minds, in Broken Hill and Kalgoorlie it was more likely to be the pre-unionate, or non-unionate, who provided enthusiastic support for racist RSL agitators like Gully and Lawrence. It was also among this group that conservative ideology potentially had the most influence, as many would have been exposed to considerable RSL manipulation on Anzac Days and Empire Days during their school years.⁷ To young unemployed men, the neat equation whereby each migrant could be blamed for taking a 'Britisher' job, was also more likely to have had a particular appeal. By way of contrast, trade unionists often referred to their organisations as seats of learning, something which new workers had yet to experience. When asked by Commissioner Edwards during the

⁴ Return of arrests and charges and results in connection with the Kalgoorlie Riots, 19 February 1934, Kalgoorlie Police file, acc. no. 430, item no. 700, State Records Office of Western Australia.

⁵ One report stated that Gully's remarks 'were constantly cheered, the big volume of noise coming from a vanguard of youngsters enjoying the fun in the front "benches".' *BDT*, 19 September 1927, 12 November 1930.

⁶ *Barrier Daily Truth*, [hereafter *BDT*], 19 September, 24 October 1927.

1914 Royal Commission whether it should be compulsory for mine workers to belong to the AMA, Mick Considine replied, 'Yes, the same as children are compelled to go to school to learn.'⁸ What union members learned in such classrooms was, of course, a mixed bag. However, considerably more lessons in anti-racism were forthcoming than has hitherto been recognised.

Proximity breeds contempt?

Against the arguments of Blainey, Markus and others, the evidence from Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill in the interwar period suggests that working class people from many different countries were drawn into these mining cities by the prospect of work and, although the dominant racist ideology of the time was a constant source of friction, integratory forces constantly challenged ethnic division. Each day, mine workers entered enormous workplaces and mingled with each other, huddled together in cages that lowered them to their section of the mine, cooperating to get the job done, eating crib in the stope, perhaps talking or playing cards.⁹ After their shift, they took showers, went for beers or headed home for meals. On pay days, many would make the trip to the union office to pay their dues. While evidence of social segregation has previously been emphasised, the Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill case studies suggest an enormous degree of co-existing inter-ethnic mingling, in pubs, on football fields, in schools, at political events. During the anti-foreigner campaign in Broken Hill, it was pointed out that even Richard Gully, the committed racist who led the campaign, had recently worked in a mining party run by an Italian man and that he 'went quiet' on the migrant issue during that period.¹⁰ These were remarkably integrated lives, shared under remarkably similar conditions. When it came to industrial battles against poor working conditions or retrenchments, Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill workers had to face the logic of racist politics and large numbers of them realised that racism was not only not in their interests; rather, it was counterproductive.

⁷ See *The Listening Post*, 26 October 1934, p. 9; *BDT*, 25-6 May 1927.

⁸ *Royal Commission on Mining Industry*, p. 348.

⁹ Interview with *Paul Sultana*, conducted by Barry York on 2 November 1984. Transcript held in the National Library of Australia, Canberra, reference no. TRC 3582/6, p. 42.

The 1914 Royal Commission investigation into conditions in the Broken Hill mines provides important evidence regarding class consciousness, false consciousness and racism. As noted in Chapter Seven, an Inspector of Mines gave evidence that he could not get cooperation from Britisher miners when seeking information about the employment of ‘foreigners’ along the line of lode. Commissioner Kerr insinuated that the Inspector would be unlikely to gain the information he sought while being escorted through the mine by the shift boss, meaning that the men would be unlikely to make complaints that would anger the shift boss and see them lose their jobs.¹¹ While this might well have been the case, it was just as possible that the Britisher miners were reluctant to ‘dob in’ the migrant men with whom they worked, especially to shift bosses and mine inspectors who seemed to be quite widely disliked. Even Britisher miners who objected in general terms to the ‘high’ level of migrant workmen resiled from identifying men with whom they had worked closely, and who were often union members, knowing that this might lead to the dismissal of the migrants.

At the very least, there were junctures where local workers failed to act in the racist image common in the historiography. There were also instances when the southern European workers themselves resisted such treatment. While migrants were almost certainly engaged to do heavy manual work for under-award wages, many resisted such attempts to exploit their labour and keep them isolated by joining large, industrial workforces, taking out union membership and working closely with their Britisher counterparts. Some settled, married and raised families. Others found conditions in Australia unsuitable and went elsewhere. Either way, the existing stereotype of migrants as isolated and easily exploited by their ethnicity fails to address the diversity of their experiences.

¹⁰ *BDT*, 20 September 1927.

¹¹ *Royal Commission on Mining Industry*, p. 42.

Ruling Class Ideology – Where are the Bosses?

Both Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill employers were attracted by the prospect that a large supply of migrant workers, unfamiliar with local conditions and often unable to speak English, would both cheapen the price of labour for low-skilled jobs and put barriers in the way of successful union organisation. Employers assumed that union officials were quite likely to blame migrant workers for rising unemployment levels and, in so doing, create a potential wedge between migrants and the union. On this basis, they believed that migrant workers treated in this way would remain isolated and cheap. To encourage working class support for the White Australia policy at the same time was an essential part of the strategy. The belief among white workers that they would benefit from immigration restriction and Britisher employment preference diverted their attention from the best way of achieving improvements in wages and conditions – by ensuring that migrant workers were welcomed into union ranks and paid proper wages. The RSL's propagandising assisted the employers' cause. Along with a range of other conservative ideas the RSL peddled, its racism was a useful influence in Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill workplaces. RSL activists worked assiduously to marginalise migrant workers and through this means encourage cross-class unity. Their continued opposition to the presence of migrant labour did little or nothing to stem the trickle of arrivals. Its constant harping did ensure, however, that migrants were never allowed to go about their business without continued surveillance, harassment and displays of racial antipathy.

The period between the wars was a time of conservative ascendancy in Australian electoral politics, but Rydon's argument that interwar conservative politicians 'built no steady organisation, no continuous electoral machines'¹² is an overstatement. The RSL was fostered by elite support and became an important institution for the organisation of right-wing politics, because of its public/private nature. Unlike fascist organisations, its members could openly organise in the community and, at the same time, retreat to a more secluded meeting place where like-

minded conservatives could participate in unguarded discussion of conservative strategies. Unlike the Nationalist Association, the RSL leadership could galvanise its membership for grass-roots activism to counter that of the labour movement.

One difference between the Kalgoorlie and Broken Hill sub-branches is particularly striking. The evidence suggests that the level of mine manager support for the RSL in Broken Hill was deliberate and calculated, reflecting the industrial uses to which the mine managers hoped returned soldiers could be put. In Kalgoorlie, by comparison, the mine managers' support for returned soldiers was much more contingent and ad hoc, perhaps reflecting the lower level of industrial disputation and unionisation on the goldfields. Whereas the Broken Hill Mine Managers Association donated thousands of pounds towards RSL projects, the Kalgoorlie RSL was forced to be far more reliant on public fund-raising. In addition, the generally supportive attitude towards the war in Kalgoorlie, even from anti-conscriptionists, contrasted enormously with the far greater antipathy evident in Broken Hill, where opposition to conscription *and* the war was frequently on display. This alone suggests that the industrial role to be played by the Kalgoorlie RSL members was far less urgent than that to be played by Broken Hill returned servicemen, and was an indication of the greater degree of difficulty associated with weakening the solidarist attitudes of the Broken Hill labour movement. In neither case were the employers successful, but this does not negate the importance of their attempts. On the contrary, it firmly situates racism as an aspect of *class* struggle and demonstrates that labour movement resistance to racist ideas is an integral part of Australian race relations.

Future directions

It is hoped that this study, in conjunction with the work of Martinez, Small and Griffiths mentioned in Chapter One, will contribute to a lasting sea-change in future historical analyses of racism. The complexity of working class responses to migrant labour opens up massive opportunities for further investigation and reinterpretation. Further case

¹² J. Rydon, 'The Conservative Electoral Ascendancy Between the Wars' in C. Hazlehurst (ed), *Australian Conservatism: Essays in Twentieth Century Political History*, Australian National University Press,

studies along the lines of those presented here would make enormous contributions to a wider understanding of the dynamics of racism. Concomitantly, the RSL is only one avenue for investigating ruling class ideology. Limitless openings exist for further analysis of the influence of racist employers, parliamentarians, educationalists, church leaders and newspaper editors. Lastly, like most interesting historical questions, an understanding of Australian racism has many contemporary ramifications. At the very least, an understanding of the labour movement's *anti-racist* past may encourage present-day campaigners around war and refugee issues to see the importance of linking with the industrial and social power of trade unions in these struggles.